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The Squabble Over Soviet Slave Labor

More than 120 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery is once again a subject of controversy in the inner circles of a presidential administration. This time, though, the slaves under discussion are Soviet, not American.

For months, an inter-agency group, including representatives of the White House, the State Department, the CIA, the National Security Council and the Labor Department, has been hotly debating the extent of slave labor in the Soviet Union.

No one questions the fact that forced labor is widespread in the Soviet Union. What the government experts have been arguing about is whether slaves are being used on a specific Soviet construction job: the natural gas pipeline being built from Siberia to Western Europe.

Like medieval monks disputing the number of angels that can fit on a pinhead, the inter-agency group's members have been debating whether slave labor is being used on the pipeline directly or indirectly, a lot or a little. The squabble, unfortunately, may become more important than the issue at hand.

A conclusive finding that slave labor is being used presumably would embarrass the Kremlin. So the White House representatives in the inter-agency group were not pleased when some State Department officials and the CIA argued that the evidence of slave labor on the pipeline was not convincing. The State Department officials and the CIA also suggested that the issue was "an old story" and didn't deserve a big media push.

The squabble came to a head with the drafting of a letter to Congress a few weeks ago which accompanied a preliminary report on the group's findings. The White House didn't like Foggy Bottom's draft, which it thought too weak. An administration source told my associate Lucette Lagnado there was "some dissatisfaction" with the first draft.

So the White House people rewrote the letter.

As finally delivered, the letter stated: "There is clear evidence that the Soviet Union is using forced labor on a massive scale. This includes the use of political prisoners."

As for the specific issue of the pipeline, the beefed-up letter said: "A number of reports suggest that forced labor has been used in some of the site preparation and other preliminary work on the export pipeline . . . clearing the forests, leveling the right-of-way, building roads and constructing living quarters."

The State Department and CIA were right about one thing. It was indeed an old story. I reported last September that the Russians were using slave labor on the pipeline, and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger reported similar findings a short time later.

Whether the story "deserved" a big media push or not, it didn't get one. So the inter-agency group is now working on its final report to Congress, due to be delivered next month.

In addition to some dramatic new evidence, reportedly including photographs, the task force is addressing some points not touched on in the preliminary report, including the question of whether Vietnamese workers are being pressed into slavery in Siberia. Such subjects are potential sources of embarrassments for the Kremlin.

The final report may contain photographic evidence, according to administration sources. And it will be subjected to "more supervision" from the White House.

Bookstores in Danger: After three years of preliminary study, the Federal Trade Commission has evidence that chain bookstores and paperback publishing companies may be illegally driving independent booksellers out of business. The agency is reported ready to launch a full-scale investigation.